

Haiti Earthquake

The Guard's participation in Operation Unified Response



Local residents walk past a building in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, March 12, 2010, damaged in the January earthquake. Members of the 118th Civil Engineering Squadron provided structural assessments of many buildings in Port au Prince as a way to reassure local residents that the buildings are safe to enter. (Photo by Sgt. 1st Class Jon Soucy)

Connecticut Airmen recover remains at collapsed hotel

By Army Sgt. 1st Class Jon Soucy
NATIONAL GUARD BUREAU

The earthquake that rocked this city left many of its structures damaged or destroyed, including one landmark that many say represented a sense of stability within a disordered city.

The Hotel Montana, a four-star hotel where diplomats, dignitaries and other world leaders often stayed, collapsed during the Jan. 12 earthquake trapping many of its guests.

A few made it out alive, and the task of

finding and identifying those who didn't fell to a variety of organizations, including search and recovery teams from France, Mexico, Canada and members of the U.S. military.

"We all volunteered to come here, but we had no idea what we would be doing," said Tech. Sgt. Bambi Putinas, a member for the Connecticut Air National Guard's 103rd Airlift Wing. "In the back of our minds, we all thought possibly ortuary affairs," she said.

Her job in the wing's services flight encompasses not only personnel issues, food services and lodging, but also mortuary affairs.

Their mission would be to assist with the preliminary identification of remains, making sure they got back home safely, including any articles, luggage, personal effects.

"It was hard," she said. "Sometimes you could actually put a face with a name or an article or something that was inscribed."

To Tech Sgt. Chris Jones, also with the 103rd, it was an opportunity to provide a sense of closure to the grieving family mem-

bers. "We were sending them home."

"Some people wanted to go out every day, no matter what," said Putinas. "You think that you're going to find somebody one day and you just keep on searching hoping to find someone."

Though it is part of the services mission set, mortuary affairs is not a skill that unit members use on a regular basis.

"It was a lot of nerves the first time we went out there," said Jones.

Unit members also relied on each other for support during the recovery operations.

"We kept an open-door policy and set rank aside if anybody needed to talk or had any questions," said Jones, who added that there were briefings and other opportunities for those at the site to discuss or work through any issues.

"We're a pretty strong group to begin with," said Putinas.

Jones recalled the day the remains of an Air Force officer were recovered.

"They said he was still in his uniform," said Jones. "His body was covered, and he was moved out of the rubble and all of us stopped working and we went to attention and saluted as he was moved past us. It was our way of paying final respects to him."

The unit wrapped up the mission in late March.

"I think I'll be telling my family members about the team I worked with," said Putinas. "And how great it was to work with the Army, the Navy, the French, the Canadians, and how people from all aspects of life could come together for one mission, in a country that none of us ever thought we would come to, and pull together and do a mission that needed to be done."



On the ground

First-hand accounts of the Haiti devastation

"There was a humanitarian mission before the earthquake and there will be one long after."

- LT. COL. CRAIG BRADFORD, commander of the 118th CES in Nashville, Tenn., and commander of the 24th Expeditionary CES in Port au Prince, Haiti. He arrived Jan. 29

"We were at the north end of the airport, and it was nothing but tall grass. And we came in with our heavy equipment and leveled the place. We put up tents and then our shower and laundry and built it up to as you see it today."

- STAFF SGT. OSCAR TREVINO of the 190th Civil Engineering Squadron (Kansas Air National Guard) was with his unit in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, as part of its two weeks of annual training when the quake struck

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- TECH. SGT. CHRIS JONES, a member of the services flight for the Connecticut Air National Guard's 103rd Airlift Wing tasked to recover remains from the rubble of the collapsed Hotel Montana

"When we arrived at the Port-au-Prince airport, we found that there was only one guy controlling everything. This guy provided the air traffic control and the ground control on where the incoming aircraft would park."

- LT. COL. KEN PECORARO, a 35th Expeditionary Airlift Squadron pilot, assigned to the Ohio Air National Guard's 179th Airlift Wing.